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ABSTRACT

Attitudes of rural parents toward postcompulsory education were examined through in-depth structured interviews with 140 parents of students in 4 rural Tasmanian high schools. The students were all in Year 10, which is the last year of compulsory education in Australia. Most parents had lived in the same community for over 10 years. The proportion of parents who had gone beyond Year 10 varied among communities (approximately 10-40 percent). When asked what they would like their child to be doing the following year, about half preferred secondary college (general education in Years 11 and 12), and 23 percent preferred employment. However, parents reported that a larger proportion of children wanted to go straight into employment. About 79 percent of parents thought that their child would benefit from further education, an idealized preference at odds with intentions. An overwhelming perception was that education is a means to a job and to getting along in society. Parents who saw education solely as a means to employment tended to see further education as irrelevant, considering the lack of employment opportunities in rural communities. The results suggest that the discrepancy between what parents think would be good for their children and what they believe their children will be able to achieve educationally is a product of barriers that rural poverty and disadvantage place on educational participation. Contains 13 references. (SV)

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PAPER PRESENTATIONS

RURAL DISADVANTAGE AND POST COMPULSORY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Joan Abbott-Chapman — Australia

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the meaning of rurality and disadvantage as seen from the perspective of parents of Year 10 students in four rural municipalities in Tasmania. The research on which the Paper is based, funded by DEET, and conducted by a team within the Youth Education Studies Centre, investigated how parents own socio-economic and educational backgrounds are reflected in their goals, aspirations and intentions for their children at the post compulsory level – especially with regard to vocational and general education and as preparation for work. The author will also draw upon other studies in which she has been involved as Deputy Director of the Centre, of educational and social factors affecting post compulsory participation in education and training, which demonstrate the importance of goal setting, and expectations for study, in decision to continue to further and higher education.

1. Introduction to the study

The influence of parental educational choices and preferences have been discussed throughout the literature and most recently in relation to levels of parental education by Williams and colleagues at ACER (1993). Williams argues that as well as the status and "wealth" factors associated with educational levels achieved, the educational attainments of parents affect the educational decisions of their offspring

> "Parents are models for such decisions, a knowledge resource, and a source of encouragement and advice for adolescents. As parents vary in their education, so too will the nature of the models to which children are exposed, their knowledge of education, and the kind of encouragement and advice provided". (Williams et al, 1993, pp. 41,42).

This Paper explores the meaning of rurality and disadvantage within this context as seen from the perspective of parents of Year 10 students in four rural municipalities in Tasmania, Australia.: and investigates ways in which their own socio-economic and educational backgrounds are reflected in their goals, aspirations and intentions for their children within changing educational and socio-economic circumstances.

Rural parents' expectations of their children's education are discussed along with findings from the evaluation of the Commonwealth government's Students at Risk Program, both funded by the Department of Employment , Education and Training. The paper examines educational preferences and choices of rural parents within the context of their own educational experiences and values, and contests the widely held view that low post compulsory participation rates of rural and isolated students is mainly due to low values placed on education and training by their parents.

2. Rural disadvantage and post compulsory participation

Rurality is often discussed in relation to retention, especially in Tasmania. According to the definition used by the ABS, most of Tasmania's population (60%) is regarded as living in "rural" or "remote" areas, with only Hobart regarded as truly "urban". This high degree of rurality may help to explain Tasmania's very low retention rates right through to higher education. (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1989, 1991). In 1993 60.6% of Tasmanian secondary school students completed Year 12 compared with 76.6% nationally and second lowest to the Northern Territory.

The chances of students from rural and isolated areas of Australia going on with their education past Year 10 are significantly lower than for students from urban areas, especially the more affluent residential areas. Participation in higher education among people from remote areas in 1991 was less than half the participation rate of people from urban areas, and the participation rate for rural dwellers was about two thirds the participation rate of urban dwellers (DEET 1992). It will be difficult to achieve national objectives set for education and training for rural Australians. "Participation in higher education and TAFE by young non metropolitan adults to levels comparable with their metropolitan counterparts by 1995"(NBEET, 1991, p. xv).

Factors explaining lower participation levels at post-compulsory level include material disadvantage including financial and distance barriers, poor knowledge of and access to information and services, lack of stimulus and social opportunities, and parent and student preferences. (Cunningham et al, 1992 p. 1). A study by Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld in Tasmania (1991) has shown that rurality is an important factor in post compulsory participation right through to higher education level, especially in relation to social as well as physical access to educational and other facilities.

A comparison of 1981 and 1986 Year 10 cohorts within a longitudinal study of retention has however shown a significant increase in participation at post compulsory levels of young people in rural and remote areas, during the 1980s, an increase which has been most marked in the rural high schools and in the

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comprehensive District high schools (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1991 pp. 77-81) This seems to reflect the impact of school programs on changing parental attitudes

3. Parental preferences for post compulsory education in Tasmania

The research was funded by the Commonwealth government under the TASPACT agreement. This program, which involved a number of schools and secondary colleges throughout the State, aimed to identify ways in which post Year 10 retention in rural and disadvantaged areas may be increased, and to disseminate findings and recommendations in a way which will assist schools and colleges to put new initiatives in place. (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1992). Within this context, 140 in-depth structured interviews were conducted with parents of students who were at time of study attending four rural government high schools located in different regions of Tasmania.

The aim was to find out not only how rural parents perceive the benefits of post compulsory education/training for their children, and how informed or not they are about post Year 10 education and training options – but also to gain an insight into the family and community "culture" and values which help to define youthful ambitions, aspirations and expectations. Students expectations for themselves, or Perceived Personal Control, have been found in other studies to be especially important (Abbott-Chapman, Easthope and O'Connor, 1993).

Questions about length of family settlement in the area, attendance of parents and siblings at local schools, and attitudes to changes going on in rural communities, were included. A contextual study of socio-demographic indices (from ABS Census data) and changes in the municipalities in which the schools are set was also conducted. Our "snapshot" of rural life as seen through these parent interviews was taken during the second half of 1991, with final Report presented in 1992 (Choate, Cunningham, Abbott-Chapman and Hughes 1992)

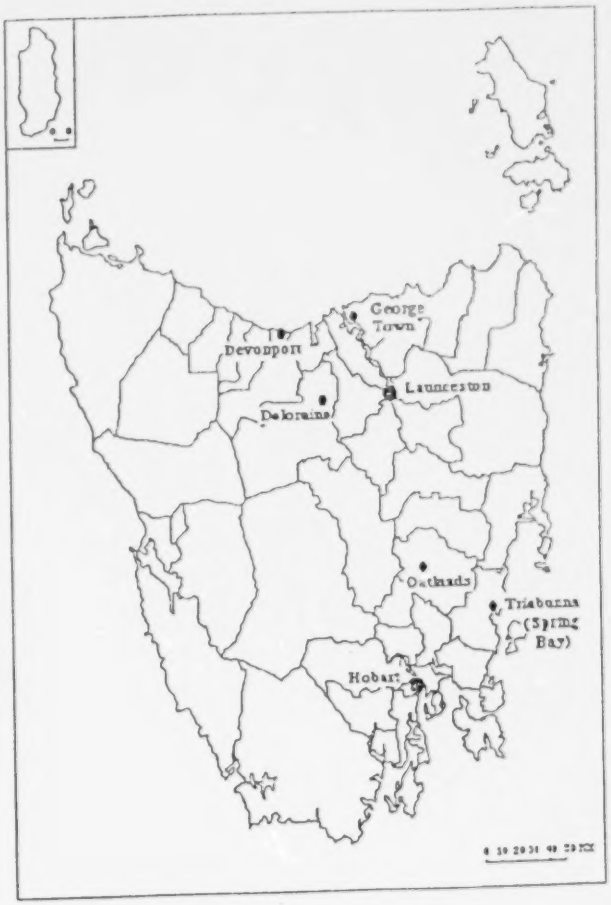
The picture emerging from the TASPACT and other retention studies draws our attention to the current problems of rural living, and of rural poverty, which impact upon the meaning which further and higher education have for students and their families within the rural areas. Findings from the evaluation of the Students at Risk program as it applies to rural areas(Abbott- Chapman & Patterson 1990, Patterson & Abbott-Chapman 1992) also draw attention to problems of rural disadvantage and the discrepancy between what parents regard as the "ideal" and "realistic" post school destinations for their children.

4. Portrait of the four Municipalities – the social and economic context

The four municipalities chosen for study - Oatlands, Spring Bay, Deloraine and George Town – represent typical rural areas in different regions of the State. Two of the municipalities have an almost entirely rural economic and employment structure – Oatlands and Deloraine. Two of them – Spring Bay and George Town have some manufacturing such as woodchipping (Triabunna) and smelting (George Town) and hence a somewhat more diverse economic and employment structure with slightly better job opportunities for young people.

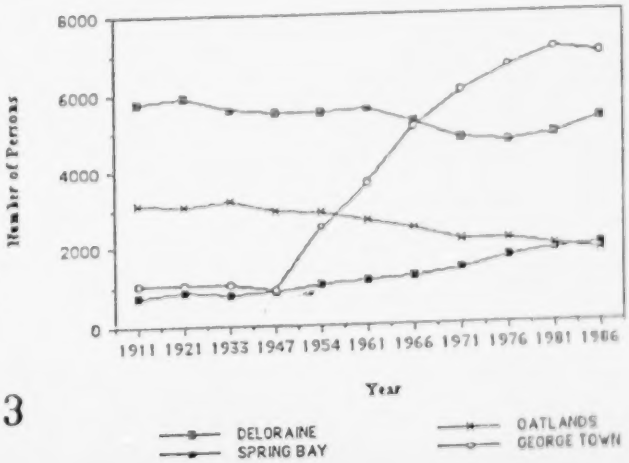
Nevertheless population trends in all areas have been characterised by out migration of young people in the search for jobs. While Deloraine has seen the beginning of an influx of urban commuters (to Launceston) seeking a rural lifestyle, Oatlands has not attracted such incomers and exhibits overall population decline. Spring Bay and George Town are two areas experiencing some growth in relation to industrial opportunities and/or the advent of tourism and holiday developments.

Figure 1: A Location Map of The Four Municipalities: Deloraine, George Town, Spring Bay and Oatlands



Population growth or decline is one index of community prosperity and vitality. Overall economic difficulties experienced in Tasmania have impacted strongly on these areas, but are being experienced differently in the four municipalities. Since 1964 the populations of Deloraine and Spring Bay have remained fairly stable with some increases over the last 15 years while Oatlands is slowly declining. George Town has experienced steady growth for forty years although there are signs of this recently slowing down due to threatened closure of the local industry.

Figure 2 Population Change For Four Local Government Areas



Previously the rural towns were highly self-sufficient and closely supportive but now with reduction in local educational and social services they are coming to rely more strongly on the larger outside centres for structural support. An increasing number of people are relying on governmental support for their very existence. The "old" patterns of social and economic relationship are breaking down, and close-knit parochialism is giving way to a social ambiguity in which young people find themselves trapped.

In Tasmania after secondary schooling to Year 10 within the government sector students must attend one of the 8 senior secondary colleges throughout the State if they wish to continue their education. Since these are in urban Centres – 4 in Hobart, 2 in Launceston, 1 in Burnie and 1 in Devonport, rural students must usually travel long distances or board out if they are to access these facilities. In times past moving away from the local area for education or employment was regarded with suspicion, but now we sense a greater willingness on the part of both students and parents to consider moving away from home to follow job opportunities and access education and training.

5. Survey of Parents of Year 10 Students

a) Parental educational and occupational background

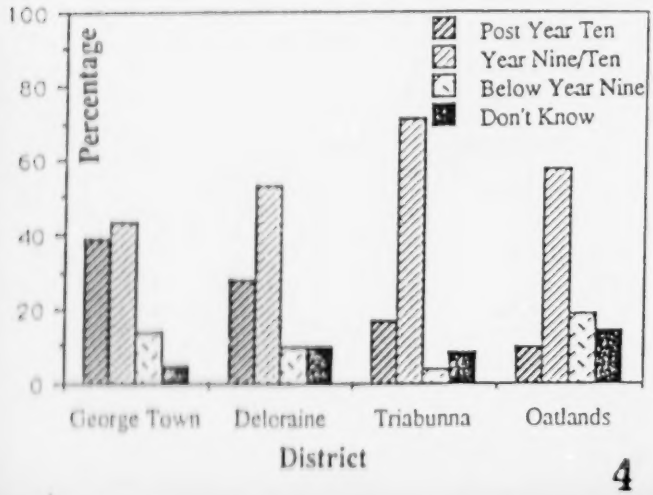
As numbers of Year 10 students, and their parents, were so small in each of the designated schools, and full school backing was given for the project, a high response rate was achieved. All parents of Year 10 students at Triabunna and Oatlands District High Schools were approached and just over 50% of parents in the two other schools. There were very few refusals, so that overall 57.9% of parents of Year 10 students in the four schools were interviewed either singly or together.

The majority of parents in our survey had lived in the same rural community for over 10 years - 65% in Deloraine, 89% in Georgetown, 77% in Triabunna and 74% in Oatlands. Many had extended family living in the district to whom they refer for support. In the four districts, however, only a minority of both mothers and fathers had attended the same school as their children – overall about 25%.

Patterns of parental educational levels in the four districts varied with regard to post compulsory education and training, although only a minority had gone beyond Year 10. Education levels attained reflect the social and economic characteristics of the districts.

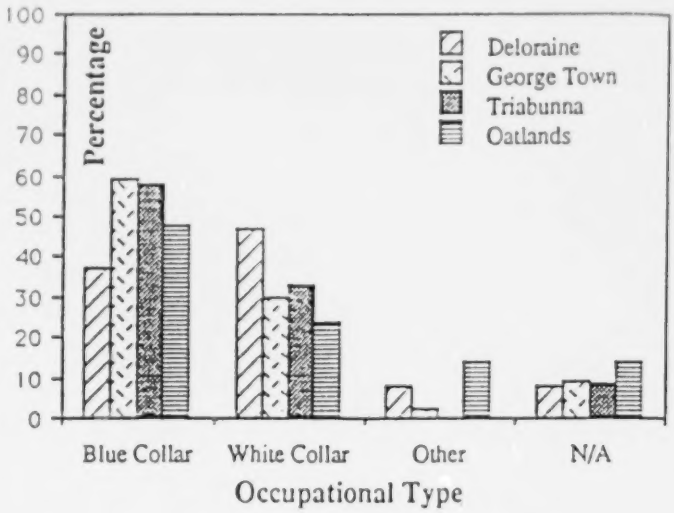
Mothers appeared more highly educated than fathers, especially in Georgetown and Deloraine, though we confine our analysis in this paper to fathers. Few of the older siblings of the students covered by the survey had participated in post-compulsory education and training and only 4.5% had entered university.

Figure 3 Fathers' Educational Level in The Four Districts



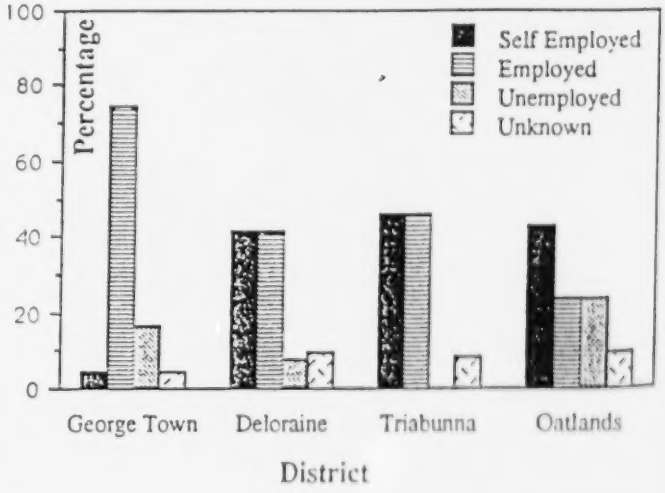
The fathers' occupations in the four districts also differed with fathers having more white collar occupations in Deloraine, both as a consequence of a more diverse labour market, and of more town commuters. Oatlands had the highest level of unemployment and the lowest level of white collar jobs, with most employment in primary industry. It also had the lowest income levels.

Figure 4 Condensed Scale – Fathers' Occupational Type in the Four Districts



The high proportions of self employed fathers in Deloraine, Triabunna and Oatlands reflect the high proportions of owner/managers of farms and smallholdings. In Georgetown the labour market is more mixed with more people working in industrial, commercial, trades and service enterprises.

Figure 5 Male Parents' Employment Status in the Four Districts



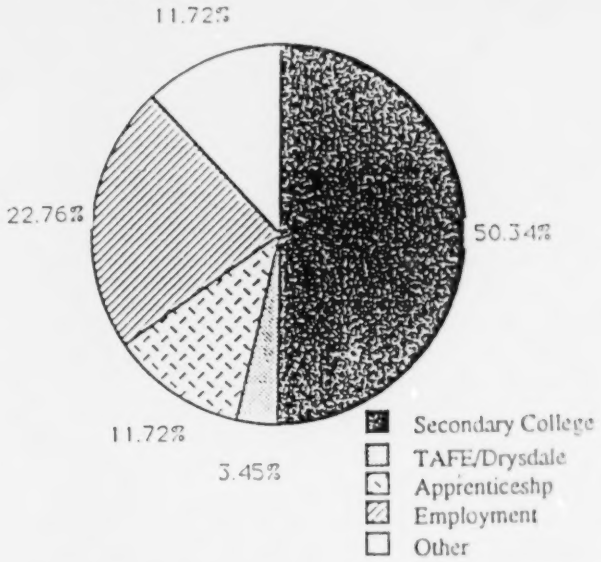
b) Post Year 10 Career and Educational Expectations

Parents were asked about their preferences for the post Year 10 destination of their child. The following pie chart illustrates the results. Attending a senior secondary college (general education in Years 11 and 12) was the most favoured choice with 50.3% of parents saying this is what ideally they would like to see their child doing after Year 10. There were however differences by municipality – 58.5% (Deloraine) 48.9% (Georgetown) 47.6%(Oatlands) and 37.5% (Triabunna). Employment was the

second most popular choice, followed by Apprenticeships, Traineeships and finally TAFE (Technical and Further Education).

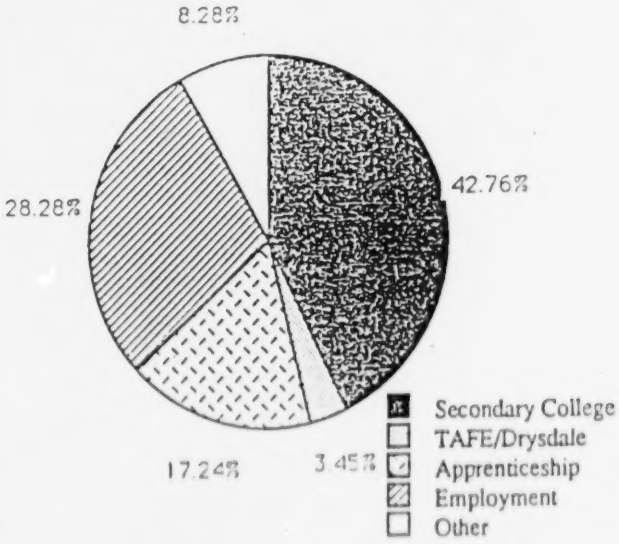
If we add together education and training of all types, including a mixture of work and study (under 'other') we can see that the first choice of parents for their children, despite their own limited educational experience, is overwhelmingly for some sort of education or training, rather than to go straight into a job.

Figure 6 Parents' Preferences for Their Year Ten Child in the Four Districts



According to the parents, a larger proportion of their children wanted to go straight into employment than their parents wanted for them. This is particularly true for Deloraine and Oatlands.

Figure 7 Student Preferences in the Four Districts – The Parents' View



As Figure 7 shows more students than parents also wanted vocational or technical training.

This paradox supports a similar trend noted in the research resulting from the Students at Risk (STAR) Program Evaluation.

> "... a higher choice by parents for continuing education-an average of 52.7% opting for the Secondary Colleges/Claremont Education Park and a further 8.3% for TAFE. This average is 61% overall compared with 48.6% of students. Conversely 30% of parents want to see their child get a job compared with 35% of students" (Abbott-Chapman and Patterson, 1990, p 33).

The pressure among disadvantaged rural students to leave Years 11 and 12 early to seek and/or get a job, even among academically achieving students, has also been noted by an ACER Report (1991) and by another of our studies of senior secondary school students.(Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld 1992) The desire for financial independence Yap (1991) and the prevalence of casual and part-time work among a substantial minority of secondary students was also highlighted.

c) Parents' views of the benefits and purposes of Education – ideal and reality.

General education is highly valued by the majority of the parent respondents in the four districts. A large proportion of parents (78.7%) think their children would benefit by going on to Years 11/12. This response represents the idealized preference toward education. The gap between idealized aspirations and actual intentions is evidenced by the fact that post Year 10 preferences do not reflect this orientation. Of the parents who think their children would benefit from Year 11, 40.5% preferred non study options, most of these preferring immediate employment or apprenticeships and on the job training. The evaluation of the students at Risk Program has found a similar discrepancy.

> "There appears to be a discrepancy here between a perception of the ideal, that is the benefits of staying on at school, and the reality in terms of actual intentions, as a fifth of the cohort, while perceiving the value of higher education, has not changed behaviour in response to this perception." (Abbott-Chapman and Paterson,1990,p. 20)

While 93% of parents agreed with the statement that "employers want better educated employees", 41% felt that "the best training occurs on the job". As many as 75% of parents in the TASPACT survey said that there would be real barriers standing in the way of their child going on with education and training past Year 10, whatever they themselves might prefer (Choate et. al.1992, p.92) The most quoted obstacle was "getting a job" (29%) followed by lack of interest in study or ability (15%) and finance (13%) Moving away from home was not seen as a barrier in itself, but in terms of extra costs which would be incurred by the family.

Similar findings from the evaluation of the Students at Risk program highlighted the barriers posed to achievement of study goals by financial costs and pressure to get a job, along with need for practical advice and guidance from schools. "Within this context parents are more in favour of further education than might have been assumed and are sometimes more in favour than students." (Patterson & Abbott-Chapman, 1992 p.2)

When asked "What is the point of education?"37.9% of the respondents stated that the point of education was to "get a job", while 12.1% thought the point was to teach the fundamentals (reading, writing and arithmetic). Respondents from Triabunna and Oatlands had higher responses in these two areas. Many respondents simply answered the question by stating that education was "necessary". Most parents accepting the need for further education stressed it should be job related. Typical responses to the question, "What is the point of education?" included:

"I'm not sure it's worth while when it doesn't get you a job in the end."

"Academic skills are irrelevant, education needs to provide fundamental learning in reading writing and arithmetic."

"Education is preparation for work".

More parents in Deloraine and George Town held a broader perspective of the purposes of education including the provision of social and living skills, (45.1% and 38.6% respectively) compared with only 15% of parents from Triabunna and Oatlands. These patterns are associated with the educational and occupational differences between the four groups of parents. Parents in Deloraine and George Town are as we have seen more highly educated and are more likely to be white collar workers or skilled tradespersons than the other two groups. They also live nearer to a large town. Only 7.1% of parents overall saw education as 'broadening perspectives' and giving 'personal development'. The

overwhelming perception therefore was that education is a means to a job and to getting along in society - 64.3% of responses fell into these two categories. However as Table 1 shows there is growing cynicism among rural parents about the degree to which education can help in getting jobs.

The "purpose" of education and preparation for employment is being called into question as there are no longer jobs at the end of the educational process. Respondents are informed and aware of the push towards further education and are asking, "Why, when the jobs are not there?". The promoted link between education and jobs is therefore a double edged sword when jobs cannot be assured. Parents who perceive the broader life enhancing purposes of education see the value of education for their children even when jobs are not available. A higher percentage of respondents listing employment preparation and the provision of fundamental skills and competencies as the general purpose of education, rather than personal development, thought Year 11/12 would not benefit their Year 10 child (9% compared with 2%)

Table 1 Educational Purposes and Whether Child Benefits

Purposes	Benefits?							
	Yes	%	No	%	Not Sure	%	Total	%
Get a job	44	83.0	3	5.7	6	11.3	53	37.9
Life skills	38	80.9	1	2.1	8	17.0	47	33.6
Necessary	26	70.3	5	13.5	6	16.2	37	26.4
Not Known	2	66.6	1	33.3	0	0.0	3	2.1
Total	110	78.6	10	7.1	20	14.3	140	

These findings and others not quoted here suggest that parents with higher educational attainments themselves are more hopeful for their child's future educational and employment career, while parents with lower educational attainments whose own livelihood is under threat are more fearful for their child's future. Personal "agency" and socio-economic context interact in complex ways in decisions made

"I'm worried. Unemployment here is high. For the first time we have a generation of non workers"

"I told my son if you get a job hang on to it - there aren't many jobs around"

"He hasn't enough experience yet to know what he wants to do and I don't know what to advise"

For other parents despite "the point" of education in terms of ensuring employment being unclear, it was still thought better for their children to go on with their education "rather than let them sit around at home unemployed". Many parents made a number of comments about local social and economic changes - not many of them for the better - which underlined the anxiety with which they and their children view the future.

"I hope the wool market settles down. We can't afford further education"

"What's the point of study when there aren't any jobs around in this area"

"I don't want to make her go on to further study - I expect she'll settle down and get married locally. She wouldn't want to work in the city"

"Well he'll just have to go where there is work, there are no jobs around here anymore"

There are no jobs available however many qualifications you've got"

Parental anxiety and pessimism about the local job situation influences students in their perceptions of the role of education and training. Nevertheless, a majority of parents (75%) in all districts said they wanted more information about Secondary Colleges. This has positive practical implications which underline the importance of parent liaison programs in schools. Parents indicated that information about courses offered, adequate supervision away from home at College, accommodation provision and information about AUSTUDY are priorities. Parents revealed they still had open minds on the issue of further education and were prepared to be supportive if questions could be answered by the schools and hence some of the "barriers" removed or reduced.

6. Conclusions – Impact of rural disadvantage on educational participation

Our findings suggest that although generally less educated than urban parents, parents of rural children are relatively open minded about the benefits of education and training even in a depressed youth job market, and are encouraging rather than discouraging their children to go on with their education and training. In some cases it is students rather than parents who are opting for employment over education.

A situation of socio economic decline and social change in Australian rural areas is associated with a growing awareness among parents that their children need more educational qualifications if they are to find jobs in an increasingly competitive youth job market, especially in rural areas.

There is however a discrepancy between what parents think would be good for their children and what they believe they will be able to achieve educationally and this is a product of barriers which rural poverty and disadvantage place on educational participation. Participation patterns are associated with a complex mix of factors both attitudinal and material, but it appears that the influence of material disadvantage factors cannot be underestimated.

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